

ADAM BRAVER

## *What the Women Do*

*September 7, 1940 to May 10, 1941: London Blitz*

So you want to know what the women do.

Here's what her mother does: at sixty years old, a former office worker, Vera MacCarthy Morrogh, born in Wales, lived, married, and bore her four children in County Cork, left her lieutenant colonel husband to live in London, walks the streets, scouring the sidewalks as an "incendiary bomb spotter"; and here's what an incendiary bomb is—it's a metal bomb, about one foot long and no more than a few pounds, full of flammable chemicals that just kind of lingers, dormant and in waiting, before it will eventually explode and catch fire from other larger explosives or combustibles; and the Luftwaffe drops them by the score from their Messerschmitts, and you can hear the casings land with a slight thud (that's the cue), and they bounce off roofs, and they roll into gutters, into yards, under trees, setting up haphazard fuse lines that wait for the next round of bombing to ignite trails of flames; the incendiary bombs are best picked up immediately, and carried to

designated depots where they are disposed of; and it has become the job of elderly women to comb the streets, with eyes not quite as sharp as they might have been but still focused, in their thick black shoes and sack dresses, with kerchiefs over their heads and the flaps hiding their faces, quietly parading down the streets, spread apart, pausing hunched like haystacks when they spot the gleam of a canister, piling the bomb sticks against their chests, delicately cradling them in the crooks of their arms; when the women walk, the bombs will shift and clank against each other, smelling a little like motor oil and grease, and if the women's arms are full they might call across the block to someone else when they spot another one, or, if they're alone or too worn to call, they'll make a mental note of the location and make a plan to return on the next sweep.

They used to chase down children.

They used to chase down stories.

They're still the gatherers.

And only the other day, in Camberwell, near Addington Square, a bomb spontaneously ignited in a woman's arms, and there was little anybody could do but scatter, because one by one each of the bombs she carried began to combust, and the best that could be done was to get some water or chemicals to keep the flames from spreading, and nobody remembers hearing her screams or for that matter even recalling she was there because they were in a frantic scramble to contain the blaze (although later some people a little farther away, uncertain of what was happening, did remember the smell, unidentifiable at the time, but nevertheless an instinctual threat), and when her name became part of the public record, and there was time for a moment of grief, one man stood up on a bench in a crowded Burgess Park and barked out to anybody who would listen that the borough's motto, All's Well, should be removed and banked and left to future generations to decide if it ever had the right to be used again.

And as with everything else these days, the things that used to be a tragedy are now just unfortunate occurrences, one of the hundreds of risks taken every day in a time of war, and one that the women do, the old women, mothers of grown children, women who not long ago already felt tired, women such as Vera MacCarthy Morrogh, who was born in Wales, lived, married, and bore her four children in County Cork, and who left her lieutenant colonel husband to live in London.

So you want to know what the women do.

Here's what she does: at thirty-two years old, Kay Summersby, née Kathleen Helen MacCarthy Morrogh, in the midst of divorce, has traded in the brown MTC uniform for which she paid nearly fifty pounds out of pocket at an Army supply store (almost a replica of an officer's uniform but with a skirt) for a pair of corduroys and a sweater and a tin hat and a gas mask (which does double duty as a purse for her lipstick and compact); she slides into the driver's seat of an ambulance, where the seats are so much harder than that of the Packard she's been driving, and where the springs push into her buttocks and her lower back and her kidneys with each bump and divot in the road, little punches that are so painful in their nonstop jabs that she takes to memorizing every road, knowing the exact moment to cut the steering wheel before a pothole or crater hole, and she's knows the routes, and as long as the roads are unscarred by new bombs, then she can maneuver smoothly, and spare her body the blows; but that's only about her, that's only the getting there, before the wounded are spread out in back and transported to hospital.

It all starts with air raid sirens, and she gets in the ambulance, and she drives toward the areas most prone to damage—usually the docks on the East End—and sometimes she'll stop at the sound of an explosion, but usually she'll drive right into it, like heading straight for the

hurricane's eye, and it's like crossing into another world, not just a parallel world but really another world, and it's hard to say where she gets the bravery or decisiveness to push through the smoke and fires and explosions other than where there was smoke and fires and explosions there were people suffering—many burnt and charred, others with broken bones, missing limbs, and bits of debris lodged in their bodies, and in this other world they are the fortunate ones, because it seems as though for every wounded body that she helps pull out from under the wreckage there is another dead one beside it.

It's a brutal stink around her.

Searing flesh and rot.

An odor that seeps into your mouth until it's all that you can taste.

There were some days and evenings when the fatalities were so high that her only utility was in transporting the bodies to the morgue, and on those days there never was enough gauze or any kind of wrapping for the bodies in the car, so the men in the field tied identification tags around the ankles of the dead, and they piled the unwrapped cadavers in the back of her ambulance as best they could, arms and legs sticking out at all angles, and the bodies themselves had to be shoved in and twisted to get the maximum in the back of the wagon, and sometimes it was tough to close the back doors—it took a shove or a squeeze against a foot that didn't get all the way in or having to bend a neck forward in order to make sure the door latch snapped.

And with the car filled, she makes her way to the first of what will be several morgues that will refuse the bodies because their rooms already are stacked to the ceilings with the victims, No room, No room, No room, and the wagon is weighted down, and the bumps she does take are that much harder, and each one starts to feel like pummeling, but the one thing she does notice is that the longer she drives the heavier the car seems to feel, and the only explanation she can find is that the souls and spirits lifting from her cargo are being replaced by a corporeal

weight that is if not an increase in mass certainly is an increase in density, and sometimes she finds herself rocking forward, trying to push the car along.

No room.

No room.

No room.

When she does find a mortuary that will take the bodies, she stays in the front seat, and for some reason never takes her hands off the steering wheel while a team of men pull the casualties out and carry them over one by one and wrap a thin sheet of gauze around them, and place them one on top of the other until they reach the ceiling, at which point the men will start a new row.

And there are some nights, when the bombs continue to fall, and the car rocks with each explosion, and she can see the flashes and smell the burning wood and toxic smoke, that one of the morgue men will rap his knuckles against her window. She'll stare straight ahead as her right hand grips the window crank and starts turning, and as soon as the glass is partway down, the man will tell her it's too rough out there, that it's not safe, and sometimes she'll wait it out, but other times, either beat by exhaustion or by total fear, she'll roll the window back up, and get out of the car. And usually these morgues are warehouses, with the bodies stacked floor to ceiling, so patterned and neat that they look like part of the physical structure of the building—joists and support beams—and typically there are a couple of beds already set up for the possibility of such occasions when the workers' safety in the outside world is in question, and along with the morgue men, she'll sit on one of the beds as though it were a couch, with no pretense of ever giving sleep a thought, no reason to freshen up with a dab from her compact still in the gas mask, and someone will have a bottle of whiskey, but there never are glasses, and they pass the bottle around, hardly saying a word, while the explosions clap around them like a summer thunderstorm, and the taste

of the whiskey dulls all the other tastes in her mouth, which is why it's so important, because, as anybody knows, smell is one of the most prolific and dedicated keepers of memory, and to dull the smell by drinking the whiskey is at least a moment's respite from remembering where she's just come from, and perhaps a way to never remember where she is now. And while it may be a bad choice of words, each swig of whiskey is meant to kill the taste of war.

And as with everything else these days, the things that used to be a tragedy are now just unfortunate occurrences, one of the hundreds of risks taken every day in a time of war, and one that the women do, women who not long ago couldn't imagine how much they'd crave a world of ordinary normalcy yet are also conflicted by the seduction of danger in this other world, women such as Kay Summersby, née Kathleen Helen MacCarthy Morrogh, in the midst of divorce, who has traded in the brown MTC uniform for which she paid nearly fifty pounds out of pocket at an Army supply store (almost a replica of an officer's uniform but with a skirt) for a pair of corduroys and a sweater and a tin hat and a gas mask (which does double duty as a purse for her lipstick and compact).

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